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Kennard case

Gov. Ross Barnett is to be commended for suspending the sentence of Clyde Kennard, a Forrest County Negro who was sent to Parchman for seven years for stealing chicken feed.

In granting freedom to the cancer-stricken Negro who once sought to enter the University of Southern Mississippi, the governor pointed out that he "acted on the record in this case." Kennard had a "perfect record" for conduct in the nearly two years he was at the penitentiary and would have been eligible for parole in a short while regardless of his physical condition, the governor said. It also could be noted that the Negro was held in jail here for more than a year pending the outcome of his case in court where he received the maximum sentence for the crime he was convicted of committing.

Taking all this and Kennard's illness into consideration, the governor acted in good faith.

But there are a few things that need to be cleared up about the Kennard case before it is forgotten.

Gov. Barnett said his office had issued several leaves to Kennard to undergo surgery and treatment at University Hospital in Jackson. Hugh Boren, executive assistant and legal adviser to the governor, said he had been in communication on several occasions with prison authorities on behalf of the ill Negro, and that Kennard was scheduled to be transferred to the hospital at the time NAACP attorneys became interested and later petitioned the State Supreme Court to transfer Kennard to a hospital.

Yet the governor said he wasn't aware of Kennard's condition until last week.

Why wasn't he told?

Naturally the governor can't be worried with every detail of every illness at Parchman, but the Kennard case, as controversial as it has been, is a different matter.

A Jackson newspaperman reported that the medical record at University Hospital showed an operation revealed a malignancy in Kennard's lower intestines, and the hospital last June informed the prison superintendent that because of Kennard's condition "a parole would be in order from the medical standpoint." The record showed that Kennard had a "prognosis of approximately 20 per cent five year survival."

Surely in view of the countless pardons, paroles and suspended sentences handed out annually in Mississippi, this information, in all fair play, should have been submitted to the governor's office.

Last September Kennard was due to return to the medical center for a checkup, but Penitentiary Supt. C. E. Breazeale notified the hospital in October that the prisoner would not be returned for the appointment, the newsman reported, adding that Kennard had been put back in a work camp last August and was kept at the camp until last week when he was put in the prison hospital. The newspaper also said Kennard's mother and sister visited him Sunday for the first time in months and he was in a state of near collapse.

The accuracy of these reports needs to be honestly confirmed or denied by the people responsible and if they are correct — which in all probability they are — they need to be explained.

We do not believe in coddling convicts. But neither do we believe in denying them proper medical attention when it is called for. And it quite possibly was in Kennard's case.